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ABSTRACT

Listening has been shown to be critical to educational, social, and professional success and teaching is a profession requiring mastery level skill. This can be aided by teacher educational curriculum which includes communication studies in general and listening in particular, and by using communication specialists as consultants and inservice presenters. This paper explores the role of teacher as listener. Four topics are discussed: (1) the importance of listening to teaching; (2) the process of listening; (3) strategies for effective listening by teachers; and (4) suggestions for improving the listening ability of teachers. (JD)

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TEACHERS AS LISTENERS

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by

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TEACHERS AS LISTENERS

"Real teachers," according to the Pennsylvania State Education Association, can't think without clutching a pencil, never sit down without first checking the seat of the chair, whoop for joy when April 1 does not fall on a school day, and are "never too busy to listen."[1]

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of teacher as listener. It is written against a background of teacher education programs which spend a great deal of time on topics such as lesson planning and evaluation and very little time on the development of listening skills. More specifically, a common strategy studied is the asking of questions. An uncommon one is how to listen to the answers. Trubowitz in "The Listening Teacher" concluded, "No one... gives much attention to helping teachers become better listeners."[2]

The paper is divided into four parts: (1) the importance of listening to teaching, (2) the process of listening, (3) strategies for effective listening by teachers, and (4) suggestions for improving the listening ability of teachers.

The Importance of Listening

One of the major roles of teaching is communicating. The importance of listening to communicative effectiveness can scarcely be exaggerated. In the order of frequency of usage, listening is the most used (45%) form of communication, speaking second most (30%), reading third (16%), and writing least frequent (9%).[3] Based on study results such as these, Steil concluded, "Without question, listening has been found to be central to the personal, social, educational, and professional success of every individual"[4]

Green and Weade point out the complex and dynamic nature of classroom communication and conclude:

> ...several factors ... contribute to the complexity of tasks facing teachers and students as they interact to construct everyday teaching-learning events in classrooms. If participants are to gain access to lesson information, take part in activities, and communicate in academically and socially appropriate ways, they must observe and interpret a vast array of simultaneously occurring verbal and nonverbal clues.[5]

There are three ways in which teachers use listening which are worthy of special attention: establishment of classroom environment, making pedoagogical decisions, and modeling effective listening behavior. One of the primary concerns of teaching is providing an appropriate learning environment. This environment is one in which children feel safe and respected; one in which their contributions are welcomed and encouraged. Wells and Wells stress that:

> All children...will learn most effectively when there are frequent opportunities for collaborative talk with teachers and with fellow pupils...(R)eal understanding, which must be the basis of all true progress, requires opportunities for conversation in which there is an effort to achieve a meeting of minds through the shared construction and negotiation of meaning.[6]

A key factor in encouraging participative learning is the communication environment, an environment determined largely by the teacher's listening behavior. Liebling stressed that the communicative contexts which teachers create "influence the extent to which children are willing to share personal experience with others."[7] The Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study adds, "Direct interaction between a student and a teacher about academic content is associated with increased engaged time and higher achievement."[8] When students share personal experience and teacher and student interact, the teacher is performing the role of listener. How this role is performed is crucial to

to the accruement of the above benefits.

An additional aspect of communication environment is classroom management. The use of appropriate and successful management strategies is tied to listening and observing. Doyle points out:

> ...a teacher's success in classroom management, defined in terms of high levels of student work and involvement and low levels of disruption, depended on his or her ability to monitor and guide a complex classroom system.[9]

A second way in which teachers use listening is to help make pedagogical decisions. A great deal of information on which to make decisions is obtained by listening to students -- to their answers, their questions, and their comments. Listening to students can help ascertain readiness, comprehension, and remediation required. In addition, it is an essential component of problem solving.

A final way in which teachers use listening is to model effective listening for students. Ever since Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act called for the teaching of listening as a basic skill in the K-12 classroom, the role of teachers as models of listening has become crucial.[10] By understanding the importance of listening, the process of listening, and explicitly and implicitly modeling listening skills, teachers can contribute both to their own success and to the learning of students.

The Process of Listening

Listening is a dynamic and complex process. The use of the Steil model is helpful in understanding what happens when we listen.[11] The model divides listening into four steps:

S Sensing

I Interpreting

E Evaluating

R Responding

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The steps normally occur sequentially, but may overlap.

Sensing is the physiolgical component; it includes hearing and seeing. While hearing is the primary sense used in listening, seeing is also an important sense which helps to determine the meaning of a message. It is sometimes called observing or "listening with your eyes."

Interpreting involves the assignment of meaning to perceived symbols. Both verbal and nonverbal symbols are decoded to determine what the speaker (more accurately the source, since the person may not actually speak) means -- what is the message? How a message is interpreted depends upon numerous and complex factors such as personal experience, vocabulary, emotions, mood, context, timing, previous messages and interactions, etc.

Evaluating, the third component, includes judgments of what was perceived and interpreted. The judgment made is dependent upon the listener's background and purpose. If I'm buying a new car I will judge the believability of the salesperson. If I'm conversing with a new acquaintance I'll determine whether this person is a potential friend.

The final component is the response segment which results from the first three steps. The appropriateness of the response is judged by the achievement of the listener's purpose. If I am trying to buy an economical and safe new car the quality of my critical listening is determined by my response. Did I purchase a safe, economical car? With the new acquaintance an appropriate response might be to either respond verbally in a friendly, encouraging way or to terminate the conversation, depending upon my decision about friendship potential.

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Let's use a teacher-student example to relate the listening process to teaching. The teacher (Mrs. B) is teaching a lesson on using the library. She notices a student (Chris) frowning. Mrs. B looks at Chris and pauses, thus encouraging him to ask, "Does the card catalogue look like the Sears catalogue?" She perceives his question orally (hears it), but also observes him as he asks. Her interpretation includes the words (Sounds like he's confused and needs a clearer description of the card catalogue), his nonverbal communication (His smile and cocked head indicate he's putting me on), and his voice or paralanguage (His voice sounds like he's teasing). Mrs. B interprets the message using all these factors (and more, such as the question Chris asked yesterday) and decides Chris is probably pulling her leg. She must now judge the message. The judgment can be of many types. Is this appropriate classroom behavior? Is it funny? If so, how funny?

After making relevant judgments Mrs. B responds. Her response will be guided by the interpretation and evaluation decisions she made. The appropriateness of her response is determined by her goals. If she laughs and says, "The only difference is the card catalogue doesn't come in the mail!", and her purpose is to maintain a friendly class atmosphere, she's probably a winner.

Strategies for Effective Teacher Listening

After discussing the importance of listening to teachers and the nature of the listening process, let's examine more closely the teacher as listener. What listening strategies are necessary for effective teaching? It is not within the scope of this paper to present all the specific skills necessary to successful listening. Rather, two general approaches will be presented. The fleshing

out of the approaches must occur over time in an academic setting under knowledgeable guidance.

Augsburger described listening as a willingness to hear. He offers a six-step approach:

1. A willingness to be truly present and available
2. An openness to attend to the other's communication
3. An interest in perceiving as another sees
4. A readiness to suspend judgment or evaluation
5. A patience to wait for the other's expression of his or her own thoughts and feelings
6. A commitment to work toward dialogue that enriches both[11]

Trubowitz more specifically relates his suggestions to teachers and suggests these additional behaviors:

1. Learn to value silence
2. Evaluate yourself as a listener
   The following questions are recommended:
   - Do I listen more than I talk?
   - Have I developed a classroom atmosphere in which children feel free to express themselves?
   - Am I aware when I stop listening?
   - Do I know what gets in the way of my listening better?
   - Have I learned to hear the messages that are communicated underneath words and beneath facial and body expressions?
   - Do I listen as accurately, carefully, sensitively as I am able?
3. Become aware of how a room has impact
4. Create a responsive environment
5. Use paraprofessionals to give listening time to children
6. Schedule problem solving sessions
7. Learn how informal situations encourage children to talk more freely[12]

Improving the Listening Ability of Teachers

In light of the importance of listening to teachers, steps should be taken to find ways in which to assure the development of essential competencies. There are two groups who require training, future teachers and practicing teachers. The methods of delivery need to be adapted to each.

Students in teacher education should have included in their curriculum a basic speech course (the type found in most general education programs) and a more specific course which treats communication topics as they specifically relate to education. Such a course is often called Communication in Education or Instructional Communication and is taught by most speech communication departments. Ideally, teacher candidates would also take a listening course.

Practicing teachers can be reached in two ways. Since most continue their education by taking graduate courses, they should be encouraged to take courses such as Communication in Education and Listening. If such courses are not presently available, they could be requested of speech communication departments. It would be rare that a department would not offer an evening or summer school course for which there was adequate demand.

Teachers can also be reached through in-service programs. Some states, like Illinois, have state communication education programs. Most university and college speech departments have educators who are interested in offering such programs. Topics can be tailored to fit the limited time available and perhaps sequenced so as to cover several important concepts. The names of qualified individuals in your state can be obtained by writing:

Dr. Don Boileau
Director of Educational Services
Speech Communication Association
5105 Backlick Road
Annandale, VA 22003

Another approach to reaching teachers is the use of a communication consultant. Often, speech educators serve as advisors to schools or districts concerned with listening. They can be used for diagnosing

specific problems, setting up educational programs and conferences, and as in-service speakers.

Listening has been shown to be critical to educational, social, and professional success. Teaching is a profession requiring mastery level skill. This can be aided by teacher educational curriculums which include communication studies in general and listening in particular, and by the use of communication specialists as consultants and in-service presenters. Every facet of the educational process will benefit from attention to this important teaching strategy.

Notes

[1]Iowa State Education Association/National Education Association, Communique, December/January 1986, 4.

[2]Sidney Trubowitz, "The Listening Teacher," Childhood Education, April/May 1975, 319.

[3]Paul Rankin, "Listening Ability," Proceedings of the Ohio State Educational Conference's Ninth Annual Session, 1929, quoted in Effective Listening, Steil et al. 1983.

[4]Lyman Steil et al., Effective Listening (Reading, Ma.: Addison-Wesley), 1983.

[5]Judith Green and Regina Weade, "Reading Between The Words: Social Cues to Lesson Participation," Theory into Practice, Winter 1985, 14.

[6]Gordon Wells and Jan Wells, "Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn," Theory into Practice, Summer 1985, 196.

[7]Cheryl Liebling, "Creating the Classroom Communicative Context," Therory into Practice, Summer 1984, 238.

[8]National Institute of Education, Research and Development Report 2, Fall 1979.

[9]Walter Doyle, "Recent Research on Classroom Management: Implications for Teacher Preparation," Journal of Teacher Education, May/June 1985, 31.

[10]Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Public Law 95-561, November 1, 1978.

[11]David Augsburger, Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard (Ventura, Ca.: Regal Books), 1982, 40.

[12]Trubowitz, 322.